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The art of teaching communication skills in the contemporary school

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Abstract

The current educational process undergoes a continuous series of changes; therefore a significantly developed communication is imperative. The mentoring process is a bidirectional, interactive process of communication and knowledge, useful in all fields of activity, but especially in education. Through mentoring activities trained individuals endowed with teaching abilities pass on skills, information, methods of intervention and behavioral patterns to entrants, people are interested in being properly trained, as well as in undertaking the permanent changes occurring in the today's society. The aim of our study lies in the recommendation of action strategies that are indispensable in our current teaching practice, and that assists with the formation of four basic communication skills (active listening, reflection of emotions, content transmission, types of questions and their verbalization) needed to support effective mentoring relationship. This study is based on a theoretical and empirical research, as the author of the paper held a series of mentoring classes at pre-university level. The observation and active involvement in the educational process has brought about a number of disturbing factors which hinder the act of communication. The outcomes resulted from the gradual application of intervention methods for communication barriers at the level of mentoring, represent a convenient, practical and constructive feedback both for the entrants and for the individuals in-service training.

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1. Introduction

Communication is a primary feature of human existence. It acts as a mediator between us and the others, but also as a mirror, functioning as control. The purpose of communication, especially in what the teaching act is concerned, is that of shaping opinions. The relationship between the two individuals or groups interacting; the exchange, sending and receiving significance and last but not least the change of behaviour, willful or not, of those engaged in the communication act are essential features for the efficiency of the communicative process.

As far as the mentorship didactic communication is concerned, we must state there are a series of features which set it apart from other forms of communication:

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- a. It goes off between teachers: mentors – beginners or trainees – mentors and has a common aim in the didactic instruction via verbal, written, nonverbal, and paraverbal communication, often resorting to the empathetic level.
- b. The didactic message is devised, selected, organized and logically configured by the teacher, on the grounds of some precise teaching aims, provisioned by the curriculum.
- c. The didactic style of communication is governed by the teacher's teaching image and by his/her psychic pattern.
- d. The didactic message (repertoire) has an explanatory – demonstrative dimension and it is sent towards the trainees using didactic strategies appropriate for the instructive-educative process in school.
- e. Communication adjusts and self-adjusts with the help of retroaction (feedback and feedforward) replacing the inhibitions that may occur in the process.

1.1. Essential features for the communicative process in mentorship activity

Generally speaking, a process is the way in which a system works. The communicative process is the way in which people interact within the systemic frame of communication. Communication presupposes interaction on two levels:

- *the content* or the communication topic;
- *the process* or the way in which people interact with respect to the aforesaid topic (in our case, mentors and the beginner graduates).

If we take part in a conversation, **we focus primarily on the topic of conversation**. At the same time, we will encounter a series of conducts specific to the process: who is speaking, how is s/he speaking, what are his/her gestures, what is their reason, how does the speaking person influence our thinking and acting pattern etc. Efficient communication means taking part in the content of communication but also in being aware of what is happening during the process. More often than not, this last feature is forgotten or used improperly. We notice only strikingly obvious conducts. We must remember that the communicative process represents 2/3 of the informational transfer, as compared to the topic of communication, i.e., the contents. And then we have to ask ourselves: isn't it relevant? Or, if it is, what good does it make us?

The moderator, mentor or the one delivering a didactic instruction session must master the communication techniques with the group of trainees/students, which s/he must combine such as to permanently keep the audience focused. It is very important during an instruction session to know and use correctly the rules concerning verbal communication, nonverbal communication and active listening.

According to P. Kotler, *The Management of Marketing*, there are a few major aspects that may make the receiver not assimilate the message intended by sender, chief among:

- *Selective attentiveness*
- *Selective distortion of the message*, i.e., the contents of learning – the receivers tend to hear what they like and what fits their beliefs and concerns. Essential features of the message may be neglected (*levelling of information*), while new personal dimensions, related to the receiver's structure, needs and beliefs are added to the message (*amplification*), without their appurtenance to message. The sender's responsibility is to make sure that his/her message is expressed as simple and clearly as possible. **Simplicity and clarity** of message are important variables in communication.
- *Selective retention of information* – as individuals only retain a small part of the message they receive, it is important that their initial attitude towards the object of the message to be a positive one; in this case the refresher of the contents will also feature the acceptance or the approach of the omitted information.

The moderator /mentor of the instruction session plays numerous roles (*acting like an actor*) s/he assumes during the activity s/he carries out:

- introduces the information;

- ☐ presents the aims;
- ☐ structures the topic;
- ☐ explains the more complex notions and theories;
- ☐ offers the *education consumer* motivation;
- ☐ increases critical thinking;
- ☐ increases communication skills;
- ☐ changes conducts;
- ☐ supports originality and authenticity ;
- ☐ facilitates the self-evaluation process;
- ☐ increases problem solving skills;
- ☐ ensures the transference of competences.

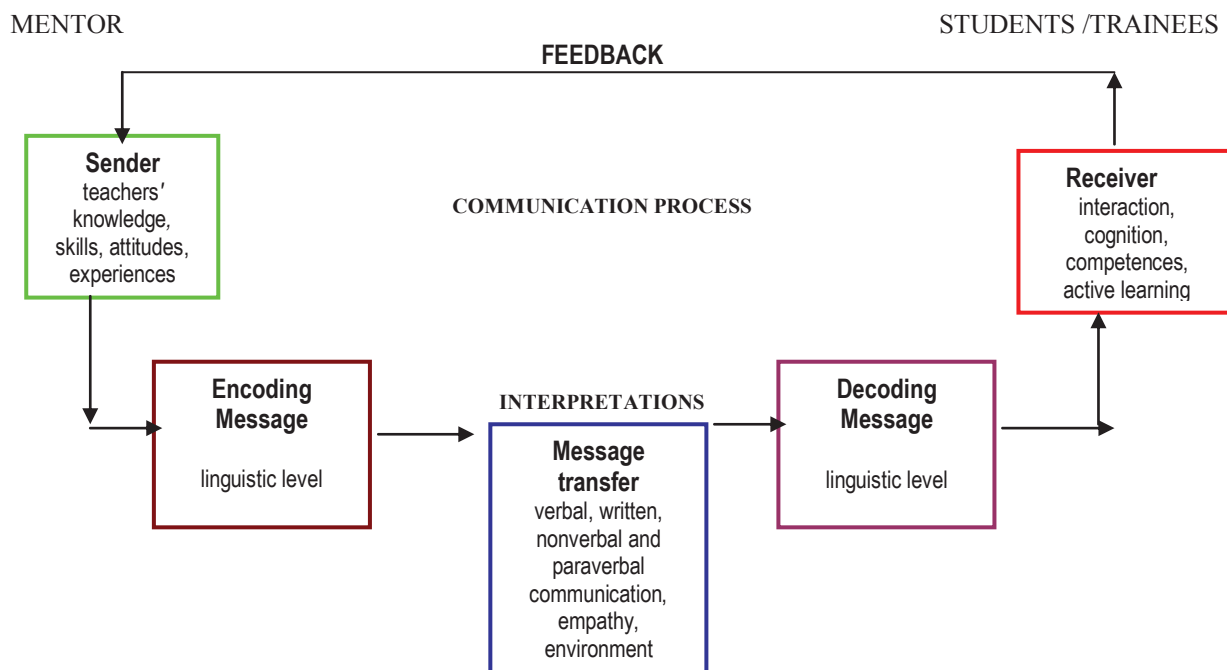


Figure 1. Communication process in mentoring

For either objective or subjective reasons, the optimal communication formula cannot be always found. (see *The Speech Chain*, 1993). Inhibitions may occur from various reasons. Both sender and receiver must be aware that there are differences between people in what the psychological pattern, education, systems and environments they live in are concerned – and that they can cause difficulties or tensed relationships (up to generating tendentious, mistaken or false interpretation of the message).

The distortion of the information in education may occur if:

1. **the sender** (teacher / probationer) does not master the content of the didactic message s/he transmits;
2. **the message** is not delivered clearly, intelligibly and systematically;
3. the sender speaks too low, too loud or too fast;
4. s/he does not introduce the aim of the message from the very beginning and does not create motivation to stir interest in communication;
5. the **transmitted message** does not fit the trainee's/students' interest or the issues they have to sort;
6. the didactic message is too well-known or too abstract and does not stir interest, producing boredom;
7. communication is unidirectional, producing passiveness;
8. **the trainees or students** are not engaged in communication through dialogue or rhetorical questions;
9. the efficiency of communication is also inhibited by the psychic distress background generated by the sender (boredom, exhaustion, impatience, nervousness etc).
10. the actors taking part in the instruction activity do not have necessary knowledge to comprehend the didactic message or the latter have not been properly appropriated, thus causing interferences.

2. Communication strategy in mentoring relationship

Knowing and abiding by some rules by both mentors and trainees are necessary for the improvement of the didactic communication. To mention just a few:

- Correct, open and direct speak (preventing or reducing message distortion);
- Feedback stimulation (in order to know to what extent have the messages been received and understood properly);
- Careful patient and encouraging listening of the messages received from students /trainees, (Active Listening) simultaneously with the effort to grasp the exact meaning of those messages;
- Using more didactic communication forms for the same type of messages (usually oral and visual simultaneously);
- Repeating and updating more complicated messages.

In the framework of the didactic communication defining the mentor – student/trainee relationship, four types of questions are transmitted: **factual questions** (referring to facts, concrete things requiring retention and reproducing the information gathered: *Define, Tell me what is...* etc), **empirical questions** (requiring the student to integrate and analyse the information gathered: *Solve the problem...*); **productive questions** (questions with more than one correct answer; these are open questions allowing students to use their personal or educational experience, the cognition dimensions, synthesis and analysis, abstractization and generalization, solving problems) and **evaluative questions** (which require students to make value judgments).

3. Findings

The mentor represents a model for the trainee or student

Establishing relationships between mentor and trainees/students rests especially upon the mentor's personality specific features to devise and maintain skillfully an intelligible, persuasive communication with the student / trainee. Hence, the student will accept to take part in the message exchange according to the mentor's skills, attitudes, explanation and persuasion abilities, and the satisfaction of the interlocutors' reasons, wishes, concerns and expectations. Otherwise, establishing communicative relationship in teaching situations rests upon the ability to judge and interpret the informational content, the psycho-social competence helping the mentor understand and appeal to the interlocutor's personality. (Trevor K, Mayes, A. S, 1995) In the teaching situation, an efficient message exchange between mentor and students cannot be carried out without them knowing the defining features of socio-human interaction, personality traits, competences, languages, features, types, statuses, roles, relationships, attitudes, experiences, expectations, conducts, functions, disfunctions etc. These personal and psycho-social features influence the implication level of the interlocutor during the communicative act more than the

message content itself. Simultaneously, an open and unbiased social-educational interaction and teachers' communicative skills generate positive effects in the communication pursuit, in the positive change of students' attitude towards learning. And the result of this genuine, high, efficient interaction between mentor and student (group) will materialize in the improvement of cognitive and affective message exchange, in increased knowledge and mutual understanding, and in high-performing behaviour.

The mentor should prove him/herself a good listener, thus managing to earn the student's/trainee's trust. Through active listening, which is a type of empathetic listening, we develop and reinforce interhuman relationships. An active listening will lead to a better understanding of the informational messages transmitted between partners in a communicative relationship.

Conclusions

Communication is also a requisite in what orientation towards a career is concerned, being the best way by which we can share our qualities, knowledge, skills with others, being (un)accepted and (un)requited accordingly.

By reference to contextual objective and subjective factors, the selection, reception, evaluation and valorification of the content, languages, means, arguments and counterarguments of the communicative process is compulsory. Also, accepting message exchange in teaching situation is based on certain reasons, mainly cognitive, affective, ego expression, self-accomplishment and/or personal improvement. Hence, each interlocutor, with his/her status and role, attitudes and skills, once engaged in didactic interaction, expresses both form and content of the message, the nature of his/her relationship with the partner, message and own's personality, *communicative competence and performance*. (Barna I., *Linguistic Orientation and Methodological Perspectives*). In other words, the process of intelligible message transmission between teacher and trainees/students is an operational interaction of the interlocutors with the ciphered information, contextual conditions and feedback of the teaching situations.

The communicative act in the mentorship activity must be carried out in a balanced manner, with diplomacy, like a true art promoting the culture of reflexive practice in the contemporary school.

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